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THE STALIN ISSUE AND THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP STRUGGLE

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Preface

Since the ouster of Khrushchev in the fall of 1964 the domestic political scene in the Soviet Union has witnessed a struggle for power within the leadership. Two of the key figures in this struggle, Brezhnev and Shelepin, have attempted to gain the support of the old-guard party apparatchiks by espousing orthodox policies; of the two Shelepin has been the more aggressive and Brezhnev in general the more cautious, but thus far Brezhnev has clearly gained the upper hand in the competition. Accompanying the struggle has been a gradual but continuing reversion toward the ideological orthodoxy, rigid controls, and repression which characterized the Stalin years. One aspect of this move toward orthodoxy has been the resurrection of Stalin's reputation and the cleansing of his tarnished image, developments which many Soviet citizens fear may mark a return to "Stalinism."

The reign of Stalin covered some 30 years, more than half the history of the Soviet Union. It was a period of intense industrialization, of forced mass collectivization, and of the great sacrifices of World War II. It was also a period of terror and repression during which millions of Soviet citizens died in the purges. Although the term "Stalinism" has a number of connotations, to Soviet citizens in general and to the intellectuals in particular, the term conjures up memories of total police control, repression, terror, purge trials, and labor camps. It is in that context that the term is used in this paper.

The scope of the paper is limited to the general use by the leadership of the Stalin issue in the struggle

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for power and the practical implications of a rehabilitation of Stalin for intellectual freedom in the Soviet Union. The paper does not deal with specific policy implications often involved in the use of the issue--such as military expenditures, agriculture, nationalities problems. Neither does it deal with other policy questions dividing the leadership.

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Chief, DDI Special Research Staff

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Since the fall of Khrushchev in October 1964 a gradual restoration of Stalin's political respectability within the Soviet Union has coincided with a return to more orthodox policies and increasingly repressive methods of dealing with non-conformists. The issue of Stalin's rehabilitation has been used by various leaders, most notably Brezhnev and Shelepin, in their attempts to attain the top position in the Party hierarchy. The aim of each has been to gain the support of the party apparatchiks, both high and medium level, many of whom were dismayed and felt threatened by Khrushchev's reformist tendencies. Thus, each has tried to demonstrate that he and he alone is the legitimate leader of the party faithful. In order to do so, each has supported orthodox views and each has attempted to reach around the reformer Khrushchev to Stalin in an effort to establish a direct line of legitimacy from Lenin.

Thus far, Brezhnev has prevailed over Shelepin in the ongoing struggle for power; in order to do so he adopted the neo-Stalinist position first assumed by the Shelepin faction. Brezhnev has also managed to stave off attempts by moderates within the leadership, represented by Podgornyy and Kosygin, to push their own policy views; in the process he has apparently gained a measure of support from them, possibly by convincing them that the alternative to him was even less desirable--e.g., Shelepin. However, while Brezhnev has emerged as the strongest of the Soviet leaders, his position is still limited by the nature of the leadership; for a majority of the Soviet leaders has a vested interest in preventing Brezhnev from acquiring too much power.

The Issue And What It Means

The Stalin issue evokes a great emotional response among those who suffered during the Stalin years and fear a return to the harsh repressive methods of those years.

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At the same time the issue has great political significance. To Communists, history is not a matter of academic concern; rather it is a vital element in political life. Communist ideology is based upon the inevitability of a certain historical progression, and the continued justification of the system as it exists is based upon the perpetuation of that concept of history. Thus, all policies must at least have the appearance of conforming to the ideology, and for this reason each successive Soviet regime has felt the need to rewrite Soviet history in order to support its own policies.

The classification of Stalin touches upon the very nature and legitimacy of the world's foremost Communist system. It was impossible to denounce Stalin without placing in question the myth of the party's infallibility and undermining its ideological authority; this is precisely what happened in the Soviet Union following Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of the Stalin period and its cult of personality. The continuing but gradual rehabilitation of Stalin is part of an attempt to return the party and the system to a position of ideological legitimacy. The damage done to the party's credibility by the denunciation of Stalin took its toll in the morale of the party apparatchiks. Thus the rehabilitation of Stalin also represents an attempt to reassure these old-guard--and by nature conservative--cadres that the party retains its legitimacy and authority.

Khrushchev's attack on Stalin represented an attack on orthodoxy and inflexibility; it was the beginning of a drive for change. In general, those who support continued de-Stalinization are those who also favor change, reform, and liberalization. They tend toward pragmatism and prefer to adapt theory to the needs of the country rather than vice-versa. Their inclination toward reform in general creates an atmosphere conducive to more open discussion and, as a result, more freedom. A positive characterization of Stalin, on the other hand, suggests a more rigid, dogmatic approach to politics and economics. Those who view the Stalin era in a favorable light have generally argued the case for doctrinal continuity and have emphasized the ideological role of the party. Their approach

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necessitates tight control and close supervision of the pragmatists and the intellectuals, and a corresponding lessening of personal freedom.

Alignment within the hierarchy on the Stalin issue, as well as on other policies, is quite complex, and the assignment of classifications to individuals and groups is admittedly somewhat arbitrary. It nonetheless serves the purpose of identifying and highlighting shades of difference in approach and in points of view. There are several groupings within the leadership which might well wish the rehabilitation of Stalin--but for different reasons and to different degrees. The old-line apparatchiks who tend to be dogmatic would, in all likelihood, welcome a return to an atmosphere of tight control and rigid, unquestioned views; this is the atmosphere in which they rose to the top and in which they would feel more comfortable. Individuals who seem to fit this description, best represented by Suslov, will be referred to as orthodox.

Another, seemingly more coordinated, group of individuals took the early lead in actively pushing an end to criticism of Stalin's cult of personality and in urging tighter controls on the content of published material. For this reason they are referred to as a neo-Stalinist faction. Their main purpose seems to have been to capitalize on the views of the orthodox apparatchiks in order to gain support in their drive for power. This faction is composed primarily of young members of the hierarchy, many of whom came up through the Komsomol and have been closely aligned with Shelepin. The neo-Stalinists have demonstrated an ability to be quite pragmatic, unlike the orthodox grouping, and even to shift positions in order to attain their main goal, the acquisition of the instruments of power.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the moderates or pragmatists see a need for change and reform in the Soviet Union and tend away from rigid, orthodox positions. Kosygin and probably Podgornyy (at least at one time) belong in this category. They would be inclined to oppose a rehabilitation of Stalin. Even more to the

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reform side of the spectrum are the liberals. The member of the hierarchy who came closest to representing this position, Mikoyan, was dropped from the Presidium in March 1966. The main strength of the liberals is found among the intellectuals--for example, the chief editor of the liberal journal Noviy Mir, Aleksandr Tvardovskiy. The intellectuals want more freedom to write, to speak, and to dissent. They have actively opposed the restoration of Stalin's image.

Shifts in policy concerning various aspects of the Stalin issue are reflected first in the intellectual community. Reversion to a favorable view of Stalin has required historians and writers to adhere to the new line. The re-Stalinizers have demanded that criticism of Stalin cease and, in the past three years, they have had considerable success in efforts to untarnish Stalin's historical image. The re-Stalinizers also demand that written material be judged according to the principles of socialist realism--which means that, when writing on the Soviet Union, criticism is out of order and only the achievements and promises of Communism may be discussed. In order to restore Stalin's political respectability, therefore, it has been necessary to reimpose prescribed, rigid formulas, and to clamp down on non-conformists.

Increasing pressure on intellectuals to conform has, in fact, accompanied the gradual rehabilitation of Stalin. In the three years since Khrushchev's ouster, the regime's warnings, threats, and outright repression have intensified. Frustrated in their efforts to continue their moves toward greater freedom and frightened by what they considered to be a move back toward Stalinist methods, the intellectuals have responded with demonstrations, petitions, and letters of protest. These, in turn, have resulted in even stronger measures by the regime--including expulsion from the party, arrests, commitments to mental institutions, and incarceration in labor camps. The result has been a spiraling cycle of action and reaction resulting in increasingly harsh measures.

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Alignment of Forces

The regime's moves toward harsher policies have generated considerable public opposition, and have been accompanied by--indeed are a part of--an ongoing struggle for power within the hierarchy. In the first few months after Khrushchev's ouster, the new Soviet leaders were preoccupied with establishing their positions and organizing their forces. Both Shelepin, a neo-Stalinist, and Podgornyy, a moderate, seemed to be in fairly powerful positions, with Brezhnev seemingly occupying a middle ground. The existence of this somewhat diffused political situation was reflected in the lack of a clear policy on culture, resulting in considerable freedom for the intellectuals. Liberal articles were numerous and criticism of Stalin widespread.

If any faction seemed to have a slight edge at the time it was the moderates. Apparent Presidium-level supporters for a moderate policy included Podgornyy, Kosygin, and Mikoyan, while those who clearly seemed to favor a hard line were Shelepin, Shelest, and Suslov. With the Presidium divided in this manner, a balancing group, conservative by inclination and headed by Brezhnev, possessed considerable power to swing votes in favor of one group or another. Polyanskiy and Kirilenko probably belonged to this group.

Infighting Begins

Brezhnev apparently saw his biggest threat as coming from the moderates. In February 1965 an attack was launched against Khar'kov Oblast, Podgornyy's former bailiwick; the author of the article was Shcherbitskiy, the First Secretary of Dnepropetrovsk Oblast, Brezhnev's old power base. In the same month members of the neo-Stalinist faction (Pavlov and Yegorychev) attacked those who criticize the period of the cult of personality. Thus, the struggle for power had begun, with the moderates coming under attack from both the neo-Stalinists and Brezhnev.

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By the early spring of 1965 the backers of a rehabilitation of Stalin had a well-coordinated campaign underway to restore Stalin's World War II image. Although Brezhnev's statements at the time were not so harsh as those of such neo-Stalinists as Moscow City Chief Yegorychev and Komsomol First Secretary Pavlov, he must have supported the proposal to restore Stalin's reputation and have swung a decision in favor of it. He probably had various reasons for doing so. In order to justify Khrushchev's ouster it was useful to demonstrate that Khrushchev had strayed from the true party line; thus, if virtually the whole period of party rule was not to be in disrepute, the respectability of the Stalin era (and of Stalin himself) must be restored. Secondly, Brezhnev too was fighting for the leadership and must have felt that he needed the support of the orthodox apparatchiks.

The decision to rehabilitate Stalin was implemented first with respect to Stalin's image as a wartime leader. Various military leaders made increasingly favorable comments concerning Stalin as a wartime leader. The military has been in the forefront on the Stalin issue no matter which line the party has adopted--always using the issue to defend the prerogatives of the military. When de-Stalinization was the line, the military criticized Stalin for not listening to the professionals. Now, they began to praise him because he did listen. Another indication of the trend was the partial suspension in the spring of 1965 of the program of rehabilitating Stalin's victims. This partial rehabilitation of Stalin was given official sanction in May 1965, when Brezhnev became the first member of the hierarchy to mention Stalin's name in public; at this time he referred to Stalin as the wartime head of the State Defense Committee.

In the summer and early fall of 1965 the liberals fought back against the onslaughts of both the neo-Stalinists and Brezhnev. Publication of rehabilitations of Stalin's victims was resumed and a number of liberal articles appeared. In early September a liberal defense of the intellectuals, signed by Pravda editor Rumyantsev,

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a possible associate of Podgornyy, appeared in Pravda. This counterattack by the liberals was, however, short-lived. Rumyantsev was fired in mid- September and replaced by Zimyanin, a Belorussian closely associated with Belorussian leaders Mazurov and Masherov, both of whom were to express neo-Stalinist opinions subsequently. Also in September the writers Daniel and Sinyavskiy were arrested for having published works abroad; this marked a victory for a hard-line approach.

Shelepin's Bid Fails But Hard-Line Prevails

Shelepin's drive for power, begun in February 1965, intensified throughout the summer and early fall; but it had been decisively defeated by the December central committee plenum. The Party-State Control Committee which he headed was abolished, and he was removed from his position as deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers. However, the moderates also received a set-back at the plenum, indicating that the strength to strike at Shelepin had not been mobilized by them, although they might well have supported it. Podgornyy replaced Mikoyan as Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, a position with far less political power than his position on the party Secretariat, which he lost. Furthermore, Mikoyan's removal indicated that this strong supporter of a moderate position was on his way out. Thus, the net gainer at this time was Brezhnev, who probably had gained the support of Suslov by supporting orthodox views.

Brezhnev's support for re-Stalinizing and the need for conformity had been revealed in the publication in October 1965 of an article by an apparent protege of his, Trapeznikov, instructing propagandists that the period of the cult should not be viewed negatively and indicating that this applied not only to the question of wartime leadership but to other aspects of the period, such as collectivization and industrialization. A Pravda article the following January instructed historians to stop describing the Stalin era as the period of the cult of personality,

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as this time in history had been characterized by many positive achievements. Consequences of this move toward orthodoxy include the arrests in September 1965, and trial the following February, of the writers, Daniel and Sinyavskiy, for unauthorized publication of their works in the West.

The 23rd Congress

On the eve of the 23rd Congress, which opened in late March 1966, there were numerous reports that Stalin would be formally rehabilitated. A number of hard-line articles and speeches given during this period supported the rumors, as did the apparently well-coordinated program to improve Stalin's historical reputation. The rumors were also supported by the resurrection of a number of Stalinist terms--such as cosmopolitanism, sharpening of the class struggle (used in reference to the 1930's), and enemies of the people. The prospect of a rehabilitation of Stalin drew strong negative reactions from several foreign Communist countries and frightened reactions from Soviet intellectuals, who sent Brezhnev a letter urging that Stalin not be rehabilitated.

Perhaps in response to these reactions the Soviet leaders stepped back from a full-scale formal rehabilitation, and when the congress opened only the vestiges of such a program remained--the restoration of the terms Politburo and General Secretary. While the return of these Stalinist terms was purely symbolic, it nonetheless demonstrated the mood of the Soviet leadership and suggested the direction in which it wished to go. Brezhnev's acquisition of the title General Secretary set him apart from his colleagues, distinguished him from Khrushchev, and identified him with Stalin, the only other Soviet leader ever to hold this title.

Brezhnev's success was further reflected in the fact that both the moderates and Shelepin again suffered set-backs at the congress. Mikoyan was dropped from the Politburo; Shelepin, apparently at this time, was assigned

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responsibility for light industry, a clear step down for him. Brezhnev and the orthodox element in the party gained, however. Pelshe, the Latvian First Secretary and reportedly a Suslov associate, became a full member of the Politburo, and Kunayev, a Brezhnev protege, became a candidate member. The continued strength of Shelepin's views was suggested by the appointment as a candidate Politburo member of Belorussian First Secretary Masherov, who, while not a protege of Shelepin, supported many of the same views.

Brezhnev's speech at the congress was mild compared with some of those which followed, indicating that in spite of the adoption of an increasingly hard-line stand, pressure by the neo-Stalinist faction for even harsher methods continued. Some of these speakers called for administrative action against non-conformist writers, and such liberal journals as Noviy Mir and Yunost' received strong criticism. After the congress these threats were halted for a period, perhaps because of the sharp protests, both foreign and domestic on the eve of the congress, or possibly as a result of Shelepin's defeat.

Liberal Initiative

Perhaps encouraged by the failure of the congress to formally rehabilitate Stalin and the reassurances given to them that Stalinist times would not return, the liberals proceeded to write and publish a number of articles in the late spring and early summer of 1966. In particular, there was a temporary upsurge in the program of rehabilitating Stalin's victims, and a number of articles criticizing Stalin for his role in collectivization appeared. This initiative was quickly squashed however, and articles casting Stalin in a favorable light soon predominated once again.

In spite of the prevalence of a conservative influence, the liberals continued to voice opposition throughout 1966. In February and in the summer, two

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meetings were held, one to discuss a book by A. Nekrich criticizing prewar preparations, and the second to discuss the third volume of the History of the CPSU. At each of these meetings those in charge lost control and attacks were launched by participants on Stalin and the personality cult. A number of petitions also were circulated; for example, in December a group of intellectuals protested the passage of a decree extending an article of the RSFSR criminal code to include any form of "slander" of Soviet society; the intellectuals feared that this would open the way for further represssion of the intellectuals. Also in December Literaturnaya Gazeta published an article demanding a truthful examination of the past. Orthodoxy still dominated, but resistance to the pressure to conform continued.

Leadership Tension Continues

Friction within the leadership was reflected in a debate which was waged in the press during the summer and early fall of 1966. The issue was that of collective leadership versus individual responsibility and all factions participated. The neo-Stalinists opened the debate with several articles stressing the importance of collective leadership and warning of the dangers inherent in the imposition of one-man rule. They received support from an unlikely direction--the liberals who used the cult of personality and the resulting violations of legality to illustrate the evils of one-man rule. Both of these factions clearly had a vested interest in retaining collective leadership and in preventing Brezhnev from acquiring too much power.

Brezhnev and his backers responded to the concerted attacks with several articles emphasizing the need for responsibility and discipline, stressing the importance of individual leadership, and quoting Lenin to the effect that irresponsibility must not be permitted to hide beneath references to collectivity. Brezhnev also responded by mentioning favorably that most notable of individual leaders--Stalin; in a November speech in Tbilisi, he referred to Stalin as an "ardent revolutionary."

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A rigid, orthodox policy clearly prevailed in early 1967. The rehabilitation program was halted and refurbishing of Stalin's image continued. Dissident intellectuals were arrested, particularly in the Ukraine and Leningrad, where party leaders Shelest and Tolstikov supported the neo-Stalinist line. Other examples of the ascendancy of orthodoxy were the harassment of Noviy Mir and the replacement of two key members of its editorial board, and the expulsion of the historian Nekrich from the party in July for his criticism of Stalin's handling of the prewar situation.

Shelepin's Defeat

With the moderates on the defensive, Brezhnev and his followers next turned their big guns on Shelepin. In May 1967, Shelepin's protege Semichastnyy was removed as head of the KGB and the following month the most outspoken neo-Stalinist, Yegorychev, was removed as Moscow City First Secretary. Shortly before his dismissal, Yegorychev had reportedly attacked the leadership at a Central Committee plenum for its handling of the Middle East crisis. Shelepin was apparently held responsible for Yegorychev's attack and his power was curtailed; in July he became head of the Soviet Union's trade union organization and then in September he was removed from the secretariat.

In the face of Brezhnev's organizational victories, Shelepin's backers began to issue more warnings in the press against high-handed leadership methods. As they had in 1966, they again stressed collective leadership, but they came down most strongly on the right of party members to criticize their superiors, citing the dangers involved in having a leader who cannot take criticism. Two of these articles used the cult of personality (one directly and one indirectly) to illustrate the dangers inherent in the imposition of one-man rule--meaning Brezhnev's. The adoption in both 1966 and 1967 of an anti-Stalin line of argument by Shelepin's neo-Stalinist

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supporters was an indication of their desperation. Finding themselves in a vulnerable position, they used arguments best suited to help prevent both the acquisition of further power by Brezhnev and their own subjection to more political defeats. Some individuals not in sympathy with Yegorychev's views might also have feared the precedent set by Yegorychev's abrupt dismissal.

The defeats suffered by Shelepin and the neo-Stalinist faction in the spring of 1967 briefly encouraged the liberal intellectuals. At the end of June several articles critical of censorship and urging its abolition were published, but almost immediately they were repudiated and the hard-line reaffirmed by articles in the central press. The arrests and trials of dissident intellectuals continued; clearly the defeat of Shelepin did not entail a corresponding defeat for hard-line policies.

Postlude and Prospects

During the first few months of 1968, the atmosphere of threat and repression grew still more menacing. Intellectuals were prosecuted for "anti-Soviet" activities; liberal articles and anti-Stalin references disappeared from publication.

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Brezhnev continued to gain strength and to hack away at Shelepin's position during the first half of the year. In April, First Secretary Katushev of Gorkiy Oblast, who had supported Brezhnev on several occasions previously, became a Party Secretary and, in May, Shelepin's protege Pavlov was relieved of his position as Komsomol Chief. Late in March Brezhnev delivered his most militant cultural statement to date. Emphasizing the importance of ideology, he described the "sharp ideological struggle" being waged and charged that bourgeois imperialists were trying to influence Soviet citizens. He attacked Soviet renegades and hypocrites who fall into the imperialist net and warned that they would not go unpunished. He again announced that what he termed ideologically "weak works" would be given a strict appraisal. Less than two weeks later a central committee plenum adopted a resolution calling for a further tightening of ideological controls. While it seems clear that Brezhnev's speech and the resolution were at least partially in reaction to the revolutionary liberalizing events taking place in Czechoslovakia in early 1968, both were consistent with the trend which had existed in Soviet policy over the previous three-and-a-half years.

While the current atmosphere is less restrictive than that of the Stalin years, when terror and repression were the order of the day, it is much more stifling than that which existed during Khrushchev's tenure. The situation varied under Khrushchev; when he was relatively strong there was a corresponding relaxation of ideological controls, and when he was on the defensive (for example in late 1962 and early 1963) there was a tightening in cultural policy and less freedom of expression. Nonetheless, the current clamp-down far exceeds in severity any clamp-down which occurred during the Khrushchev years.

At the present time there seems little likelihood of a return to a more liberal policy. Over the past three-and-a-half years there have been few personnel changes at the highest levels of the party, but those that have occurred have tended to strengthen the hard-line forces apparently dominated by Brezhnev. As long as the leadership balance remains essentially intact the prevailing policy is likely to remain orthodox and, if anything,

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become more repressive.

On the other hand there would also appear to be a limit to the extent of regression to Stalinist tactics as long as the current leadership structure remains. In 1956 when Khrushchev in his "secret speech" condemned Stalin's crimes he implicitly pledged that such methods would not again be employed, thus limiting the potential for control by an individual and laying the groundwork for the sanctifying of collective leadership. While the rehabilitation of Stalin and the crackdown on the intellectuals have raised the spectre of a complete return to Stalinist terror tactics, such a reversion virtually presupposes the ability of one individual to impose his will and authority. Barring a crisis situation in which one man might have to make the decisions, the diversity still existing within the Politburo would seem to work against such a possibility.

Each member of the hierarchy, whether moderate or orthodox, has an interest in preventing any other individual from acquiring too much power. Thus, although Brezhnev is quite clearly first among equals, and is more secure than ever before, his power in far from unlimited. For example, while he has undermined Shelepin's position considerably, he has not yet been able to oust him from the Politburo, and a number of Shelepin's supporters remain in important positions. Each member of the hierarchy has a vested interest in seeing that Brezhnev's ability to exert his will remains limited.

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